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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: emerging issues: the social drivers of sustainable development

Note verbale dated 20 January 2014 from the Permanent Mission of El Salvador to the United Nations addressed to the Secretariat

The Permanent Mission of El Salvador, in its capacity as the Vice-Chair of the Commission for Social Development, representing the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States, brings to the attention of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in its capacity as secretariat of the Commission, the report of the event entitled "Sustainable Cities for the Welfare of All", which took place on 16 October 2013 in Panama, in the context of the twenty-third Ibero-American Summit of Heads of State and Government (see annex). The Permanent Mission of El Salvador requests the Department to circulate the attached document, as a document of the fifty-second session and to bring it to the attention of the members of the Commission.

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Annex to the note verbale dated 20 January 2014 from the Permanent Mission of El Salvador to the United Nations addressed to the Secretariat

Synthesis paper

[Panama, 16 October 2013]

1. Introduction

The world is becoming increasingly urbanized. More than half of the world's population of over 7 billion people were living in cities as of 2008. The world population is projected to reach 9 billion by 2050. The urban population (including the inhabitants of small urban centres) will constitute more than 70 per cent of that total.

Populations are even more urbanized in Latin America and the Caribbean, where four out of every five people currently live in cities. In that region, the majority of population growth in recent decades has taken place in urban areas. The urban population grew from 69 million in 1950 (41 per cent of the total) to 311.6 million (70.3 per cent) in 1990, and is set to reach 500 million by 2015, constituting more than 80 per cent of the region's total population. In addition, children make up approximately 75 per cent of the urban population of Latin America and the Caribbean, with current estimates placing their number at 155 million. Included in that figure are some 50 million children and adolescents living in poverty without access to the advantages of urban life in terms of services and quality of life.

Population levels are not the only factor contributing to the importance of urban areas. Economic and cultural activities, as well as educational and employment opportunities and health services, are also concentrated in these areas. Moreover, cities are vital centres of civic engagement and political participation; they are where citizens find the most conducive spaces for organization and the expression of their demands.

However, cities are not without their difficulties and challenges. Urban growth has been associated with an increase in the number of urban residents and workers in precarious situations. Such disparities within urban communities require differentiated strategies with strong, local roots. Slums have gradually come to be associated with rapid, uncontrolled urbanization; and the problems that affect populations living in precarious conditions have helped to shape a negative view of rapid urbanization. At the same time, urban population growth and the corresponding increase in social and economic investments in urban areas have increased human and material exposure to the risk of disasters, as well as vulnerability to their impact.

Evidence shows that the negative perception of urbanization is unwarranted, since it has led to increased opportunities, competitiveness and efficiency. Poorly informed policies, which have often sought to curb urbanization, have only led to deeper inequalities and the deterioration of the physical conditions of disadvantaged urban areas, as well as the living and working conditions of urban residents. The full potential of urban development requires a coherent, forward-looking policy framework and concerted efforts that go beyond local government. For cities to achieve their full potential and attain sustainable and equitable growth, they need to

confront the current challenges of sustainable development management and governance.

Cities and towns will not be sustainable if the issues concerning the living and working conditions of their inhabitants are not addressed. These issues are especially important in Latin America. The citizens themselves have the solutions to their problems; as such it is important that they participate in planning and that the most excluded and marginalized are given a voice. In that regard, the United Nations system argues that sustainable urban development can only be achieved through a coherently integrated approach based in rights, social inclusion and protection, security, the availability of quality public services, decent work, risk reduction and environmental sustainability. In that endeavour, the United Nations system and other international and regional agencies and institutions are implementing a number of programmes and actions to help the region's countries to promote sustainable urban development.

2. Background

Considering the importance of cities for Latin America and the Caribbean and its future, the United Nations regional directors, in cooperation with the Ibero-American General Secretariat and the Government of Panama, agreed to hold an event entitled "Sustainable Cities for the Welfare of All", on 16 October 2013, prior to the XXIII Ibero-American Summit of Heads of State and Government to be held in Panama City on 18 and 19 October 2013 under the title "The political, economic, social and cultural role of the Ibero-American Community within a new global context".

The themes were addressed from a holistic perspective, integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development: social, economic and environmental.

The event ended with a participatory meeting at which solutions to the various challenges identified, as well as options and perspectives for the future, were proposed.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

Cities present us with a twofold reality. On one hand, they have enabled greater access to basic social services, and employment and entrepreneurship opportunities. However, they are also the sphere in which inequality, vulnerability and insecurity have become most manifest.

It is in cities where it has often been easier to reduce poverty and where more people are joining the ranks of the middle class. It is also where Governments face a host of new demands to improve the quality of urban services and infrastructure.

While there are many employment opportunities in cities, working conditions are, in reality, often poor. The rights of workers are not fully respected, and/or workers do not have access to social security. There is also unemployment. For these reasons, Governments face the added major challenge of promoting decent work.

To overcome these challenges, significant investment is required. As such, the mayors' offices or municipal governments responsible for managing cities must possess sound financial health in order to be able to obtain the necessary credit for investment.

The question of a government's financial soundness is closely linked to the issue of appropriate urban planning and financing. Both urban planning and financing must be strategic, participatory and gender-sensitive, such that investments and budgetary allocations are appropriate to address the problems that actually affect the well-being of the population as a whole, while taking into account the distinct needs of those groups that experience greater inequalities.

While the financing of Latin American cities is essentially a question of mobilizing the available resources in a country's public and private sectors, international cooperation still has an important role to play, for example, in linking local projects with international experience, and in delivering technical assistance.

Empowering local governments, including through awareness-raising activities on the social and environmental problems affecting individual citizens, and creating opportunities for mayors to share experiences and good practices with a view to solving the problems encountered in daily administration, could also be excellent tools for making progress towards the attainment of equality, sustainability, efficiency and effectiveness.

It is important to highlight that security is the product of complex relationships, and should be comprehensively addressed: the social, cultural, and environmental conditions conducive to the realization of the rights of a city's inhabitants should be guaranteed. A city with more and better schools, health facilities and public spaces to play or practice sport is a safer city.

In a world where the impacts of climate change grow stronger each day, and where the carbon footprint produced by human activity must be minimized, cities can make great strides in the area of energy efficiency. Technological innovations have allowed corporations to offer more energy-efficient products that have a very significant impact on the carbon footprint when used in cities on a massive scale.

Changes in energy efficiency should be part of the transition to a green economy. This can then generate increased opportunities for green/decent jobs in the formal sector. In that regard, the parameters or standards of green building become important drivers of the transformation.

At the same time, the rapid increase in recorded losses has made disaster risk reduction in urban areas a key concern. It has therefore become necessary to intensify efforts to reduce the impact of hazardous conditions.

Gender-sensitive, rights-based, and non-discriminatory social policies are essential to ensuring social cohesion in cities and avoiding the negative implications of spatial segmentation, discrimination and exclusion.

Mega projects can improve the living and working conditions of marginalized and excluded populations, but highly targeted interventions can also have a significant impact. For example, universalizing access to safe drinking water and building public water systems have a huge impact on social inclusion; however, such undertakings are often the result of the timely mobilization of grass-roots communities and organized groups of women, whose use of time and heavy unpaid workload should be recognized and valued in economic terms.

Municipalities also have an important role to play in building a care economy in which children, persons with disabilities and dependent older persons receive the support they require, without relying solely on the unpaid domestic work that

usually falls to women. Furthermore, with regard to training, advocacy and awareness-raising activities, it is always important to employ a gender-sensitive approach that promotes work-family balance for women and men; greater inclusion of men in child-rearing, and domestic and care work; and greater inclusion of women in formal-sector employment and the formal economy. Local authorities should also develop policies for children such as the universalization of the civil registry, improvement of the quality of education, integration of indigenous children and children of African descent, and prevention of teenage pregnancy.

Community participation is, in fact, of great value to the development of social inclusion projects. With community participation, a slum can be transformed at lower cost into a safe, productive living environment with access to services and employment opportunities. Men and women living in poverty are organized and have collective affiliations that should be identified and integrated.

Gender-sensitive, participatory strategic planning makes it possible to budget for activities that promote greater gender equality within the community, as well as to allocate resources to prevent and punish violence against women and girls, and raise community awareness of it. It is important that women participate in decisions relating to resource allocation, and that they benefit directly from it. In addition, the conservation and environmental sustainability of ecosystems play an essential role in the provision of critical environmental services for the well-being of everyone.

Cities should be free of discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or social status. Municipal governments play an important role with regard to civic education and the development of a public awareness that is respectful of others, pluralistic, democratic and based in law. Access to services, including water, energy, reproductive health, education, and HIV/AIDS prevention, should be guaranteed to the entire population, but in particular the poorest and most vulnerable population groups, as well as young people and adolescents.

Local leaders, with their vision and commitment to a sustainable development agenda, are the crucial political ingredient for turning citizens' goals into reality and concrete projects. They should be modern, and guided by evidence-based analysis that uses available data and results in sound and effective action. Those leaders cannot ignore the fact that the effective governance of cities is largely dependent on proper coordination of local policies with national policies.

Similarly, government agencies must realize that a city is not a self-sustaining entity; rather, it depends on its exchanges with adjacent territories and the system of cities within a country. In that regard, everything relating to a city's connectivity with the outside is in the interest of the city itself. For example, a city's quality of life is affected by the maintenance of biodiversity in its surrounding areas. The city should be seen as a system whose life and energy depend on the connection between cities and rural areas.

A protocol for systems of indicators to rank cities by sustainability should be developed to track progress towards the achievement of sustainable cities. The debate on the post-2015 development agenda and the sustainable development goals presents an important opportunity to address the challenges and opportunities of cities in the region.